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Hunting and fishing among the Lepchas

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224 Hunting, which formed only a century ago a substantial part of the economy of the Lepchas[1] — the aboriginal inhabitants of the Himalayan State of Sikkim — is at present gradually decreasing in importance, in proportion with the development of agriculture and the breeding of cattle. Many of the Lepcha men still pursue hunting occasionally, but more in the way of a useful pastime and only a few professional hunters can be found nowadays.

223 224 262 The animals hunted are birds — only those, which do not feed on carrion and meat in general, being considered fit for consumption — hares, deer, musk deer, stags, bear and wild pigs. Some of these animals are hunted not only for their meat but also in order to obtain some parts of the body which are valued as medicines, e. g. the bile and liver of a bear, the bones of certain birds, etc. — Crows, rats and mice who attack the crops, are killed as well, but not eaten. Occasionally, a leopard or man-eating tiger is trapped, but their meat is not touched. The hunting of elephants and rhinos which was rather popular at one time, judging from the numerous accounts still circulating among the Lepchas, does not seem to be practised anymore.

784 177 224 A religious prohibition which is, however, not always strictly kept, exists against the killing, and especially the eating, of monkeys, who frequently invade the fields and cause considerable damage. No other *tabu* seems to exist, except the prohibition of killing a white

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784 elephant, a custom having its origin in the Buddhist religion, which
177 began to spread among the Lepchas four centuries ago.[2] Otherwise,
224 all animals can be hunted at any time, except when having young.

411 The main weapon of a Lepcha hunter is the bow (*să lí*). It is
[283] always made of bamboo, with a string (*să lí grím*) made either of the same material or from a nettle plant, called *kŭ ju*; the best bow-strings, however, are manufactured from the fibres of the *kă fit* tree. The bamboo, which is used for making the bow, has to be carefully selected. It should be cut at the height of the dry season (December—January) from a bamboo growing at a high altitude and in an open spot, where its stem has been frequently bent by the wind. Before using the new bow, it has to be smoked for some time and also later, the bow as well as the arrows rest always on a bamboo platform (*pŭn hróp*), which one finds in Lepcha houses suspended above the open hearth. The bow is kept released and is only spanned when it has to be used.

Arrows (*tsóng*) are made preferably of a reed (*mók tu*) or, less frequently, of bamboo. Normally three steering feathers (*tsóng ro*) — the feathers of a kite or duck being preferred — are set into cuts made previously in the reed and are afterwards glued and fastened with strings. A deep, square or oblong cut (*dem*) is made to receive the bow-string and, lastly, the portion of the reed holding the steering feathers is painted black. To some of the hunting arrows, however, no steering feathers are attached. The barbed arrow head (*tsóng thyak*) is made of iron; it possesses either a short conical metal tube, which receives the shaft or has a short iron rod, which is pushed into the shaft. In the latter case, the end of the shaft is then tightly bound with a string and impregnated with resin. Arrows used to scare away thieves, and the toy arrows of children, do not possess iron points but carry instead a short bamboo tube on the front of the shaft, to render the missile harmless.

411 Sometimes poisoned arrows are used for hunting and formerly also
278 for warfare. The poison most frequently applied for this purpose
224 is aconite (*pă kí*). An aconite root is kept ready by the hunter and

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the poison is prepared only shortly before the hunt begins. The root is ground between two stones and then some water is added to form a thick paste. Lepcha hunters are very careful in handling aconite and should their hands show even a small cut caused during house or field work, they will refrain from using the poison on this day. Should an animal be killed by a poisoned missile, the hunter will wait until the body of the prey has grown cold — »the poison returns then from the heart to the wound« — and afterwards that part of the body, which had been wounded is cut off and thrown away.

Hunting weapons

Four different kinds of bow are used by the Lepchas:

1. The hunting bow in the average 140 cms long. This type of bow was also used in warfare.
2. A bow, in the average 180 cms long, used in marksmanship. The central part of the bow's shaft (*pyăng shing*) is usually strengthened by a piece of bamboo, cut in a typical Lepcha design and fastened to the rod of the bow by resin and strings. The arrows, used for this bow, have a simple, conical iron point without barbs.
3. *Da bryó să lí*, pellet bow, in the average 150 cms long, used for killing birds. The centre of the bow's rod is usually strengthened by a piece of bamboo. Four small, flat slivers of bamboo are bound together in the middle of the bow-string to form a small square, upon which a clay-ball (*da bryó*) can be placed. This central piece of the bow-string is called *să lí bryeng*. The bow-string is fastened to the shaft of the bow in such a way, that it remains slightly turned to the right, allowing the missile to fly past the bow and the hand which holds it. — The clay-balls, used for the *da bryó să lí* are usually burned to make them harder. The pellet bow can be seen very frequently in use during harvest time, when the fields have to be guarded against birds.

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4114. A small cross-bow is employed by the Lepchas in an automatic trap, which will be described later.

The bow is carried over the shoulder or in the hand, while a simple bamboo tube, which can be closed with a lid of the same material, serves as a quiver (*sǎ lu*).

It is customary among the Lepchas to handle the bow and arrow in the following way: The left hand grasps the rod of the bow in its centre and the upstretched thumb presses the shaft of the arrow gently against the bow. The first finger and the middle finger of the right hand together pull the bow-string, the stump end of the arrow resting between these two fingers. — To prevent injury from the released bow-string, the left armwrist is usually protected by a piece of leather, a woven bamboo bracelet (*tŭk bya*) or by a ring, made of a cow's horn.

411 Occasionally Lepcha hunters use a spear (*sŭng hlyo*); its barbed
224 iron head has in the average a length of 35 cms. The spear is mostly used when hunting bear or wild pig. Some Lepcha hunters even claim, that a poisoned spear can be used successfully for killing a rhino, which is said to have one weak spot in its back where a mortal wound can be inflicted.

224 Stories circulating among the Lepchas narrate that formerly pointed and poisoned wooden logs were used for killing elephants. After finding a passage in the jungle frequented by elephants — mostly near a place where elephants would come to drink — several hunters climbed on some high trees on both sides of the passage, suspending the log with the help of ropes above the trail. When an elephant passed below, the log was released at a favourable moment to wound the animal in the neck. The prey was then simultaneously attacked by other hunters with poisoned spears.

Traps

A great variety of traps are used by the Lepchas and only the most frequent types should be mentioned here.

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For catching jungle fowl, hares and other small game, a spring bow (*ver sak*) is set in the following way. A short piece of wood, with a broad notch in its upper part, is stuck firmly into the ground and then another piece of wood, which has a notch loosely fitting into that of the first piece, is placed into it in a horizontal position. A bamboo shoot or a small tree is bent, a string attached to it and, lastly, a sling is made, which is led over the upper, horizontal arm of the previously described device. The bait is placed on the sling and by pulling at it, the horizontal arm slips out of the vertical piece and thus releases the trap. — The same kind of trap, only in a larger size, is used for catching deer.

Another kind of sling trap used for catching jungle fowl is the so-called *ma ló*. It consists of a row of slings, made of the hair of a horse-tail, which are suspended from a fixed horizontal beam.

A Lepcha dead-fall (*kóp*) for killing jungle fowl, is constructed as follows: A string is fastened to a tree and then led over a flat stone; the string ends in a short bamboo stick, to which a bait is fastened. Then another short string is bent into a loop and its two ends are firmly fastened to the ground at the bottom of the stone and the bamboo stick with the bait is then pulled through the loop, formed by the lower string, the tension of both strings holding the stone in a tilted position. A slight movement of the bamboo piece causes the upper sling to slip out of the loop and the stone thus drops on top of the animal.

Another kind of dead-fall, which has to be set on a jungle path, is the so-called *shil*. It consists of a heavy wooden beam, supported on one side by a lightly placed stick, which might be easily knocked down by an animal running along the path.

For catching birds, a small grill is made out of a few bamboo sticks, and is afterwards smeared with tarry birdlime (*a' yók*), obtained from a *Ficus* tree. The birdlime is usually kept ready for use in a small bamboo container (*po tek*). The grill, already smeared with bird lime, is known as *a' yók pün grim*; it is placed over

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troughs, filled with water, over springs, where birds come to drink or on the tops of trees.

An automatic spear trap (*sa lak*) is used for killing deer and sometimes a number of such traps are set, should a man-eating tiger roam around a settlement. In this case, people are warned to stay in the houses until the hunters have removed the traps again. The spear-traps are set with great care and at a certain hight, the hunter calculating the size of the tiger from its footprints. The spear-trap is made as follows: A huge bamboo tube is cut lengthwise and firmly fixed at a certain height and position with the help of several bamboo supports. Then a long piece of bamboo is fastened horizontally above the ground — at the same height of the bamboo tube — and bent strongly backwards until one end of it reaches the bamboo tube, where it is then held in its spanned position by means of a simple cock. A string is fastened to the latter and stretched low across the jungle path. At last a strong piece of bamboo, the front-end of which has been cut to a sharp point and usually poisoned, is placed in the tube as a missile. — Usually another string, also connected with the cock, is spanned breast high and further away in the direction from which a man might approach. If somebody then stumbles unaware into the trap, the missile is released beforehand without causing harm.

A small cross-bow trap (*sĕ lak tyăk*) is used for killing rats. It consists of a miniature cross-bow which aims into a bamboo tube, closed at its further end. The bow-string is cocked over one end of a movable bamboo stick, the other end of it, to which some bait is attached, reaching into the bamboo tube. By a slight pull at the bait, the stick, which holds back the bow-string, is moved and the arrow thus released. — It may be mentioned in this connection that poisoned food is also often laid out for killing rats, mice and other animals, who harm the crops.

Jungle fowl is sometimes caught with the help of a tent-like net. Its top is loosely hung up on a branch and its sides are fastened to the ground. On one side only, an entrance is left by lifting the flap

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of the net and supporting it with a stick. Some corn is placed as bait on the ground inside the net and the hunter then hides himself in a nearby bush. Should some fowl enter the net, the hunter hits the stick supporting the flap with a stone, thus closing the trap, or he simply begins to shout; the fowl flies up, the net is detached from the branch and falls on top of the prey.

While most of the before-mentioned traps can be easily handled by a single man, in some cases, especially in big game hunt, the cooperation of several hunters is necessary. Huge camouflaged pitfalls (*tüng hóng*), mostly with sharp spikes at the bottom — made of a small, but very hard kind of bamboo (*po yóng tsu*) — were constructed for trapping elephants and rhinos. For catching the latter, a spot in the jungle had to be located first, where a rhino would habitually come to answer its call of nature. Lepcha hunters claim that the rhino then usually begins to walk backwards and easily falls into a pit.

To catch leopards or tigers alive, a heavy cage with a trap door was constructed; in this case, a living bait was used. Small cages with trap doors are sometimes placed in the fields, to catch monkeys who cause damage to the crops.

The hunting of wild pigs is often carried out by a group of hunters. At first, rows of huge bamboo spikes are erected under a cliff and a number of men, forming a beating line, try to chase the wild pigs towards the cliff, from where they eventually drop on the spikes set below.

Occasionally beating lines are formed to drive animals towards a line of archers. In the driving hunt, fire is never used as the Lepchas fear that a fire in the jungle might get easily out of control and become a danger to men and their property.

Fishing

A few among the Lepchas, mostly those whose dwellings lie close to a mountain river, practise fishing, but as in hunting, fishing also

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226 serves only to supply some food in addition to that obtained by tilling the fields and raising cattle. The following fishing devices are used by the Lepchas:

An ordinary fishing rod (*vór ham*) of bamboo, with a string and an iron hook (*vór*), upon which a bait is placed. — Similar to this is a simple device, certainly more ancient, called *hryeng*. Here the hook is substituted by a short, sharp piece of bamboo, which gets stuck in the throat of the fish.

Sometimes, a series of baited hooks is immersed in a river. The end of every line is wound around heavy stones lying on the bank and each string is then bent to form a sharp angle, being held in this position by a small stone. Should a fish get caught, the line will be moved out of its position and the fisherman who after some time comes to control the trap will thus recognize that a fish has been hooked.

226 Various kinds of nets, mostly made of the fibres of creeper plants,
226 are used; the most frequent type of net is the so-called *sŭng li*, a conical throwing net. When spread out it is in the average some 140 cms high and its diameter measures approximately 160 cms. Around its opening, oblong pieces of lead are fastened and a long, strong rope is attached to its upper part. The fisherman, standing in the river, winds the rope loosely over his arm and then at a favourable moment throws the net quickly over the fish.

226 *Tŭk shor*: A simple bamboo trap, in the average some 60 cms long and 30 cms in diameter. To construct this device, a strong piece of bamboo is cut lengthwise, to three quarters of its total length, into a great number of sections. These sections are then bent apart and held in this position by a woven bamboo ring, the trap thus taking the form of a funnel. — Usually, several *tŭk shor* are placed in a row, near a stony barrier in the river, where fish are likely to jump and might thus fall into the trap, fig. 1.

Kŭr vyo: A pocket, made of bamboo; also the *kŭr vyo* is fastened to a barrier in the river, to catch the fish who are trying to jump the obstacle.

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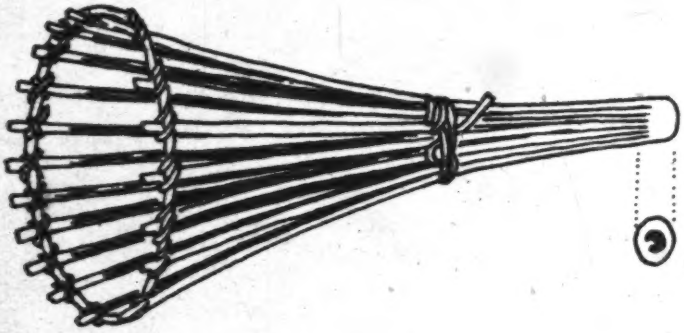

Fig. 1. A simple bamboo trap.

Ról or *Yet*: A huge chute made of bamboo, which is placed close to a small waterfall, above the surface of the river. Its planks are set wide apart to allow the water, which falls on it from above, to flow quickly away, while bigger fish are left dry on the boards.

Fit: A narrow-woven bamboo basket with long spikes at its opening, which are turned towards the inside of the trap, preventing the fish, which had entered the basket, from leaving it again. The *fit* is placed into the water and held down by a stone, placed on top of it. The fish, which has been caught, is removed through a slit in the bottom of the basket; this opening is afterwards closed again with the help of a bamboo string.

A heavy stone or hammer is used to hit the stones under which some fish have taken refuge. The dazed fish are then caught by hand or with the help of a net. This method is mostly applied during the dry season, when the streams are very low. — Occasionally, Lepcha fishermen use also bow and arrow to kill fish.

For the following methods of fishing, the cooperation of several fishermen is required:

A stone barrier is erected across a river, leaving only one opening

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in the wall, into which a huge, narrow-woven basket is placed. A beating line is then formed and the fish are driven into the trap.

At a favourable spot, by diverting a river into a channel and then erecting barriers of sand and stone, a small artificial lake is made in the old river bed. Afterwards, huge quantities of *a'ung el* (*Artemisia vulgaris*) are collected, placed into the lake and pounded. Then cut pieces of a strong creeper (*brüng*) are thrown into the pool, and the juice of these plants disolving in the water will poison all the fish which had been trapped in the artificially made lake.

All the catch, obtained by collective methods of fishing, is eventually divided equally among the participants.

NOTES

1. About the Lepchas see the following publications:
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   Das, Kali Kumar, The Lepcha People and their Notions of Heaven and Hell. Journal of the Buddhist Texts Society, Vol. VI, Pt. 1. Calcutta 1896.
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   de Beauvoir-Stocks, C., Folk-lore and Customs of the Lep-chas of Sikhim. Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Proceedings. Calcutta 1925.
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   de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, R. and Gorer, G., The use of thread-crosses in Lepcha Lamaist Ceremonies. Eastern Anthropologist, Vol. IV, No. 2. Lucknow 1951.
   de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, R., Ancient Funeral Ceremonies of the Lepchas. Eastern Anthropologist, Vol. V, No. 1. Lucknow 1951.
2. The rites and beliefs, connected with Lepcha hunting and fishing, will be dealt with later in a separate publication.